



Original Article

# Sensitivity to situated positionings: Generating insight into organizational change

Management Learning

1–19

© The Author(s) 2018



Article reuse guidelines:

[sagepub.com/journals-permissions](https://sagepub.com/journals-permissions)

DOI: 10.1177/1350507618808656

[journals.sagepub.com/home/mlq](https://journals.sagepub.com/home/mlq)



**Sierk Ybema and Frans Kamsteeg**

Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, The Netherlands

**Karlien Veldhuizen**

Het Adviesbureau, The Netherlands

## Abstract

Within ethnographic forms of organisational research, sensitivity to context is generally acknowledged as a critical ingredient for analysing processes and practices. When conducting such research, however, researchers typically privilege one particular research context for generating knowledge: although some ethnographic scholars underscore the importance of adopting a diversity of both insider and outsider roles, ethnographic research is usually equated with gaining a deep familiarity with the field of study through immersion. First, we argue that, although immersion elicits valuable knowledge ‘from within’, its prioritisation inevitably blinds the researcher’s eye to equally interesting insights stemming from alternative – and often unintended – positionings. Testifying to the significance of researchers’ relational reflexivity for data interpretation, we show how a variety of researcher’ positionings vis-à-vis the researched generated a variety of insights. Critical sensitivity to fieldworker identities in an ethnographic study of planned organisational change within a police organisation allowed us, second, to criticise the change management literature for routinely building on a fixed dichotomy between ‘change agents’ and ‘change recipients’ and to empirically demonstrate a wider variety of police officers’ positionings in relation to change initiatives (i.e. countering, complying with and co-opting) and its initiators (i.e. engaging in other-depreciating, self-questioning or self-affirming identity work).

## Keywords

Context, ethnography, fieldwork roles, identity, police, reflexivity

## Introduction

Ethnographic forms of organisational research commonly assume that human ‘thought and behaviour’ are situated within a social context and ‘cannot be properly understood outside the context in which they are situated’ (e.g. Bate, 1997: 1156). If human conduct is indeed context-specific, it

---

### Corresponding author:

Sierk Ybema, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, De Boelelaan 1105, 1081HV Amsterdam, The Netherlands.

Email: [s.b.ybema@vu.nl](mailto:s.b.ybema@vu.nl)

follows that researchers also need to be sensitive to how their own conduct is situated within a variety of contexts and their positionings therein. Curiously, however, ethnographic research tends to privilege one single research context for generating knowledge above all others – that is, one in which the researcher's positioning in the field is that of an immersed fieldworker. Although researchers occasionally reflect on non-immersive fieldwork roles (e.g. Cunliffe and Karunanayake, 2013), ethnographic fieldwork is primarily equated with, and often defined as, 'immersion' within the field of study (e.g. Van Maanen, 2011: 219). In this article, we empirically demonstrate that research into everyday organisational life must move beyond predefined notions of the fieldworker as an immersed 'insider' in order to generate data from a variety of positionings. Drawing on excerpts from our fieldwork in a Dutch police force, we show that 'it is not only high-quality relationships in the field but also those that are disruptive that may lead to interesting theorizing' (Michailova et al., 2014: 138). Having ourselves been initially caught up in ethnography's traditional aim to develop close ties with 'the natives' and to generate knowledge 'from within', we found – much to our own surprise – that we actually gained equally valuable insights from various unintended fieldworker identities. Our results allow us to empirically demonstrate that 'different roles within a setting can be exploited... in order to get access to different kinds of data' (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007: 86).

In this article, we present different kinds of data on the political struggles caused by a planned organisational change that was implemented within a Dutch police force in order to promote citizen-oriented, professional and result-driven policing. Illustrating the added value of cultivating a critical sensitivity to intricate fieldwork relations, we show how police officers, instead of embracing one position vis-à-vis change, situationally switched from one positioning to another in relation to both the change programme and police managers – the latter themselves the self-proclaimed agents of change. This is where our article makes a second contribution. Our ethnographic case study allows us to critique and amend the tendency in the change management literature towards 'templating' both the actors involved into a change agent/change recipient dichotomy (Thomas et al., 2011) and change recipients' response to change into a resistance/compliance dichotomy (Mumby, 2005). Specifically, our data empirically shows how police officers situationally adopted a variety of positionings both in relation to change initiatives – that is (1) subtle countering, (2) reluctant compliance with or (3) co-optation of change plans – and in relation to its initiators – that is, engagement in identity work that was either (1) other-deprecating, (2) self-questioning or (3) self-affirming.

Our article's methodological and theoretical contributions are tightly interwoven. Often inadvertently, our fieldworker's adoption or projection (by others) of different identities – that is, that of ignorant newcomer, managerial representative or interested interlocutor – allowed us to observe police officers' different positionings vis-à-vis the managerial change efforts. In other words, the researcher's critical sensitivity to the situated positionings in the field allowed us to 'see' the situated positionings of the researched throughout the change process.

Before discussing the present investigation, it is useful to outline the literature on both researcher identities in organisational fieldwork and organisational change in order to provide points of contrasts and departure.

## The situated positionings of fieldworkers

In ethnographic and other forms of fieldwork-based research, the emphasis is typically on establishing closeness to the field of study and developing a deep familiarity with other people's life-worlds. As Butcher (2013) explains: 'The notion of embedding oneself in the field is accepted as a pre-requisite of any meaningful narrative produced by an ethnographer. It is what distinguishes this craft from other research approaches' (p. 242). Likewise, Bate (1997: 1163–1164) recommends not

only developing an ‘intense familiarity with the subjects and their ways, of “knowing”, of having a “street cred”’, but also drawing ‘so close... that there is something approaching complete removal of the “me-anthropologist-you-native” framework, and a major blurring of roles’. He also credits Van Maanen for having become, ‘for a time at least, a “sort of police officer” with the Los Angeles Police Department’, and Armstrong, a ‘sort of football hooligan’, among the Sheffield United supporters. This firm preference for an insider role is derived from the inspiration most organisational ethnographers seek in anthropology’s trademark participant observation (e.g. Van Maanen, 1988), which ‘routinely involves immersion in a culture over a period of years’ and ‘participating in social events with the people of that culture’ (Silverman, 2000: 37). By ‘living with and living like those who are studied’ (Van Maanen, 1988: 2, 49–50) the ethnographer aims to give an ‘experience-near’ account of the ‘native’s point of view’ (Geertz, 1974: 28).

This is, however, only half of the story. When reflecting on their fieldwork experiences, ethnographers tend to acknowledge that ‘embeddedness does not begin to describe the nuances of ethnographic fieldwork’ (Butcher, 2013: 242). Likewise, they recognise that ‘[m]arginality, detachment, self-reliance, and estrangement provide the distance that allows for the possibility that fresh ways to view and understand what is occurring in the place and time of study will emerge’ (Van Maanen, 2011: 230). In line with this, and contrary to the perhaps overly romantic notion of fieldworkers building rapport and becoming ‘indigenous insiders’, there is also a notion of organisational fieldworkers who make the familiar strange again (Ybema and Kamsteeg, 2009), ‘poised’ (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007: 89) between insiderness and outsiderhood (Cunliffe and Karunanayake, 2013), indigeneness and foreignness (Desmond, 2007: 289). As Bate points out, participant observation ‘involves holding the roles of “participant” and “observer”, insider and outsider, in tension so as to ensure that one is close enough to see what is going on, but not so close as to miss the wood for the trees’. Depictions of the ethnographer as a ‘marginal native’, a ‘self-reliant loner’, a ‘professional stranger’, an ‘innocent ethnographer’ and a ‘simultaneous insider-outsider’ (e.g. Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007) all capture this idea of the fieldworker’s in-between position, of being both stranger and friend.

Although they are not entirely consonant, we endorse both views – ethnography as immersion and ethnography as insider/outsiderhood. However, we also believe that outsiderhood deserves more than an obligatory warning ‘not to go native’ or the occasional reflection on, or passing reference to, non-immersive fieldwork identities. While insiderhood is widely acknowledged as essential, ‘outsiderhood’ tends to be treated as concomitant rather than critical to ethnographic field research. In fact, immersion may simultaneously be ethnography’s most significant strength and its major weakness. Seeing ethnographic research as a process of cultural learning that ‘*only* deep immersion in the field can make possible’ (Watson, 2011: 206; emphasis added) may create a particular type of fieldworker, one that seeks communal belonging, desires to become ‘deeply rooted’, demonstrates a ‘longing to belong’ (Butcher, 2013: 247) and prioritises thinking ‘from within’ (Shotter, 2006) – that is, a type of researcher that may be slightly myopic. Organisational ethnographers typically set out to study day-to-day happenings in workplaces, assuming that much of the intriguing questions of organisational life are ‘hidden in ordinary exchanges of ordinary people on an ordinary sort of day’ (Ybema et al., 2009: 1). Once immersed, however, a fieldworker may fail to be intrigued exactly because it has become so ordinary. We tend to have a blind spot for what is normal, familiar and routine because it appears to us as unexciting and then becomes, in a literal sense, unremarkable. The very ‘mundane-ness’ of normality prevents us from seeing it.

For that reason, ‘distance’, which deserves to be valued *as much* as ‘closeness’, actually becomes *more* important when a researcher is embedded in the field because, in George Orwell’s (Desmond, 2007: 290) words: ‘To see what is in front of one’s nose needs constant struggle’. As Julian Orr (1996: 7) reported in his own ethnographic research, his experience as a technician

blinded him to some of the more common issues because, as he put it, ‘my notes omitted things that were obvious in the field but are less so at a distance’. Over-familiarity with the field created ‘a tendency to regard certain phenomena as unremarkable which are not really so to outsiders’. To break free from the myopia of immersion, outsidership is a necessary companion to insidership (Ybema and Kamsteeg, 2009): closeness shows us organisational realities ‘from within’, whereas distance lets us turn the (seemingly) familiar inside out. Consequently, we may need to more seriously ‘opt... for some middle ground’ – in-between ‘the Martian’ and ‘the convert’ – in order ‘to experience the world freshly from the outside and knowingly from the inside’ (Davis, 1973: 342). To develop more-grounded insights, fieldworkers must be a cross ‘between native and alien’ (Desmond, 2007: 290) and take, alongside an insider identity, more detached positions in the field. From this vantage point, ethnography can be defined as a combination of empathic familiarisation (up-close observations and in-depth understanding) and critical defamiliarisation (naive amazement, active probing and distant analysis); simultaneously drawing close *and* remaining strange(rs) to subjects and situations.

Being open to and reflecting on alternative, more detached fieldworker identities may not only help to see the familiar with new eyes and to ‘eye the unremarkable’ (Silverman, 2000), it may also help fieldworkers become reflexively aware of the impact of both the researcher’s and the researched’s positionings on their own abilities to generate novel insights. While the notion of a fieldworker being poised between insidership and outsidership is useful as a starting point for reflexivity, it also constitutes a simplistic binary opposition that hardly helps to capture the complexity of researcher versus researched relations in the field. When conducting fieldwork, understanding is always co-constructed, emerging out of a multiplicity of interactions between researchers and participants (Cunliffe and Karunanayake, 2013). As they take insights from ‘the situated life-with-others’ (Hibbert et al., 2014: 278), fieldworkers may benefit from developing self-conscious awareness of researchers’ and others’ positionality within the research process (Alvesson et al., 2008). While researchers often report ‘wrestling with choices about their relationships with respondents’, it is ‘relatively rare’, as Cunliffe and Karunanayake (2013: 364–365) point out, for organisation and management studies to address ‘research relationships and positionality’ and, even rarer, for them to address the resulting effects on the type and quality of the generated data. Methodological textbooks tend to acknowledge the complexity of researcher roles in fieldwork (see, e.g. Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007: 82), but researchers hardly ever explore the complex dynamics that emerge in relationships between the researcher and the researched and how these impact the data.

Once they are reflexively aware of their own engagement in multiple relationships situated within specific interactions and settings, researchers may become responsive to the possibilities of situating and resituating themselves in relation to their participants for both the generation and the interpretation of data. For instance, having examined the shifting and situated nature of research relationships, Cunliffe and Karunanayake (2013) offered a detailed analysis of a researcher’s positioning in relation to his or her research participants. Drawing on a notion of researchers as being in what they call hyphen-spaces, they suggest that researchers reflexively probe the identity relations that surface between themselves and their research participants. Conducting fieldwork involves working within various hyphen-spaces, constantly shifting between one’s self-positioning as insider and outsider; similar and different; engaged and distant; politically active and actively neutral (Cunliffe and Karunanayake, 2013). In the remainder of this article, we explore the complexity of the relationships between the researcher and the researched in the field in order to empirically show how such different positionings yield different insights. In our case study, we specifically yield new insights into a broad range of participant positionings vis-à-vis a planned organisational change.

## The situated positionings of ‘change recipients’

In order to show the analytical potential of various researcher positionings for generating and interpreting data, we focus on employee responses to a planned organisational change. Building on critical researchers’ assumptions that actors’ sense-making of organisational change is context-bound, we show how sensitivity to the fieldworker’s alternating positions in the field may contribute to a contextual understanding of participants’ alternate positionings vis-à-vis change plans.

In recent years, organisational change researchers have criticised ‘monological’ accounts of change, instead shifting research attention towards processes of negotiation between alternative and competing views (e.g. Mumby, 2005). From this viewpoint, organisational change can be conceptualised as something that is constantly being enacted, resisted and negotiated rather than planned, communicated and implemented. Generally, the change management literature tends to capture complex social dynamics of an organisational change process in a simplistic sender–receiver model, distinguishing between ‘change agents’ and ‘change recipients’ and leaving those who ‘receive’ change little more than the options of either embracing or resisting it (Dent and Goldberg, 1999). To view organisational change as a multi-authored process instead (Buchanan and Dawson, 2007) involves focusing research not on change versus resistance, but on mixtures of resistance and compliance (e.g. as seen in ‘frontstage’ or ‘backstage’ resistance, see Ybema and Horvers, 2017) and the dynamic interplay between alternative positionings. Capturing, in this way, the unfurling of change ‘in flight’ (Buchanan and Dawson, 2007) allows us to bring into view the power struggles between organisational actors (Mumby, 2005) and the micro-politics of resistance (Thomas et al., 2011).

While critical scholars widely acknowledge ‘polyphony’ (Bate, 1997) in discursive struggles over organisational change, few studies empirically show how organisational actors talk and act differently in relation to organisational change in different situations. Qualitative researchers have been exhorted to provide thick descriptions of social contexts, but qualitative research into organisational change has ‘often missed a rich source of theorizing by not more explicitly considering the role that the context itself may play in the change dynamics’ (Gray et al., 2012: 125). Usually, organisational research silently assumes that change processes unfold in a similar fashion across different settings. A notable exception is the study by Thomas et al. (2011). Building on the view that (planned) organisational change is part of a constant process of ‘organizational becoming’ fraught with power and resistance, they persuasively argue that the frequently invoked dichotomies of power versus resistance, and ‘change agents’ versus ‘change recipients’, are unhelpful simplifications in the interpretation of change processes (see also Kellogg, 2009). Describing negotiations between senior and middle managers over the implementation of a cultural change programme, they show small-but-significant shifts in the meanings ascribed to both the change process and the actors involved.

If the nature of a context at all dictates or shapes its change processes, then we must become more sensitive to the situations and settings in which these processes unfold. In an attempt to sensitise research aimed at investigating the day-to-day happenings of organisational change to a contextual reading of the data, we will focus on the situated sensemaking efforts of organisational actors involved in a change programme by zooming in on interactions between the researcher and the researched. Like Thomas et al. (2011), we also show shifts in meaning-making during a process of change. Unlike Thomas et al. (2011: 36), who built their case on an analysis of managers’ discourse throughout one workshop, we draw on participant observations made in a variety of situations, allowing us to analyse employees’ ‘shop-floor’ speech and day-to-day practices in different settings (Orr, 1996: 1) and thus participants’ situated positionings in relation to the change initiatives and its initiators.

## The research

An ethnographic case study of police officers' responses to management's attempts to instigate cultural change at the Dutch 'Waterland' (a pseudonym) police force inspired and illustrates the argument set out in this article. The Waterland police commander had requested that the first and second author help explore the impact of a community-policing change programme on his team. For this article, we have built upon the material generated by the third author (from here on referred to as the fieldworker) during 3 months of fieldwork. In this section, we explain our research approach and the research setting.

### Research approach

The research findings stem from different sources and methods. Our fieldwork comprised observations, document analysis, (formal) interviewing and, in particular, 'shadowing' police officers in their daily work. In the first phase of the research (January-February 2009), the fieldworker generated data through document analysis and preliminary conversations with both management at various levels and the staff involved in the programme's implementation. Informants engaged in a reflexive process in which they analysed their own involvement in designing and implementing the programme. Open-ended questions were employed to facilitate informants' recollections and reflections. This first phase allowed us to get initial insights into both the contents of the change programme as it was recorded in policy reports, and the ideas underpinning the programme and the committee members' views on it.

In the second phase of the research, from March to May of 2009, we aimed to study police officers using ethnographic methods. Given that interviews produce material for studying a field's dominant discourse and deviations from it but tell little about the situated experiences of day-to-day life, we decided – in what may be called a 'dialogic' style of research – to follow or 'shadow' police officers on their 'natural' outings, throughout their routine (and sometimes not so routine) day-to-day work in the neighbourhood, their cars, the lunchroom and so on. Because 'shadowing' (or a 'go-along') is a 'hybrid between participant observation and [informal] interviewing' (Kusenbach, 2003: 463), ongoing conversations mixed with collective action 'on location'. By asking questions, listening and observing, the fieldworker was able to actively explore police officers' experiences and practices as they moved through, and interacted with, their physical and social environments. Consequently, while we did conduct a few formal interviews with a select number of police officers, the bulk of (conversational) data was drawn from a 'natural' work context. Rarely tape-recorded, these encounters and hence our accounts are 'as accurate as memory and ear allow' (Van Maanen, 1988: 56).

Selected in consultation with the unit chiefs, the fieldworker focused on two district teams (one a mixture of middle-aged and older, 'established' officers, the other of relatively young officers). From each team, the fieldworker shadowed nine officers (who were often accompanied by a colleague). The interview protocols were rather 'loose' and contained open questions about the participants' general biographies and tenure at the police, as well as about their views on the organisation's historical development and current situation, including their perceptions of the internal and external images of the police. Spanning the irregular parts of day and night shifts, interjected by team meetings, briefings and presentations, as well as lunches, dinners and coffee breaks, these go-alongs/interviews were often conducted over the course of many hours, sometimes almost complete days. This shadowing approach provided ample opportunities for observing behaviour and recording meaningful narratives.

A reflective interchange between research participants' views and our own interpretations, and between theory and data, characterised the interpretive process. First, our analysis focused, through



a detailed reading of the material, on developing an overview of the variety of different voices and practices that existed in relation to the change programme. The fieldworker discussed this overview with the first and second authors and, in cases of obscurities or gaps in the material after transcription, asked for feedback from participants as a form of ‘member checking’. To discuss the research findings, she also organised two meetings with both the teams and with the management and support staff. After this first round of interpretation, we focused our analysis by clustering categories and abstracting our reading of the data to a more conceptual level of interpretation. Narrative descriptions and initial analyses in conference papers involved, again, going back and forth between raw data and emerging categories. This process strengthened our interpretation and furnished the description with empirical depth and detail.

By focusing our analysis on police officers’ (rather than managers’) positionings towards the cultural change programme, we were able to distinguish three dominant responses in which police officers constructed the meaning of the programme differently and cast the main characters involved in different ways. We termed these responses ‘critically countering’, ‘reluctantly complying with’ and ‘co-opting’. Grounding our analysis in the literature on organisational change, resistance and identity (e.g. Ybema et al., 2016), we analysed each response in terms of its specific forms of self-other talk (Ybema et al., 2009), which allowed us to discern within each response three different types of ‘identity work’; that is, ‘people’s ongoing efforts to create, confirm, and disrupt a sense of self’ (Beech et al., 2016: 520), namely: other-depreciation (via criticism and mockery), self-questioning (via reluctant compliance) and self-affirmation (via co-optation).

Throughout the interpretive process we became increasingly aware that the identities often inadvertently adopted by, or ascribed to, the fieldworker were crucially important for the generation of data. The police officers’ meaning-making efforts were intimately linked to their perceptions of the fieldworker within a particular context. To explore these interactional dynamics, we again focused on identity processes by analysing how the researcher and the researched positioned themselves in relation to one another. Our analysis demonstrated how a variety of fieldworker identities (that of the ignorant newcomer, the management representative and the interested interlocutor) allowed us to describe how officers alternated their positionings vis-à-vis the change project and its proponents (police management) from one situation to another. The situational variety of research participants’ positionings towards the change initiatives illustrates the relevance, for the generation of data in fieldwork, of cultivating a sensitivity to the researcher’s various identities in the field.

To illustrate this argument, we present empirical materials in the form of a series of three ‘vignettes’ of police life or combinations of ‘scenes’ (cf. Orr, 1996: 14). In doing so, we draw particular (and particularly illustrative) fragments from the larger data set, like snapshots or stills, rather than trying to tell the ‘whole story’ of the change process; an approach that allows us to maintain some of the qualities inherent to ethnographic fieldwork and textwork – that is, tapping into ordinary life, providing a lifelike description and developing a context-sensitive understanding. For each vignette, we have sketched (1) the situational context, (2) the particular identities of the researcher and the researched, (3) police officers’ positioning vis-à-vis the change initiatives and (4) officers’ self-other positioning in relation to the change initiators (see Tables 1–3). In the following sections we summarise our main findings in the tables using the categories of the researcher/the researched’s relationship and participants’ (self-other) positionings vis-à-vis the cultural change programme.

### *The setting*

Organisational research suggests that bringing about change within police organisations is difficult – a result of police organisations’ bureaucratic character and clear cultural precepts, as well as a strong ‘us versus them’ attitude. Such impediments to change have not stopped police management

from developing cultural reform plans, such as the shift towards community and problem-oriented policing (e.g. Reisig, 2010). In response to growing discontent with the bureaucratised and inward-looking tendencies of the police apparatus (Reisig, 2010: 2), problem-solving through citizen involvement has been a key focus of ‘community policing’, also within the Waterland police force. Waterland is a region north of Amsterdam. At the time of the research in 2009 and 2010, Waterland consisted of around 800 employees of whom 80 percent worked ‘in a uniform’ or in a criminal investigation department and 20 percent in ‘management’. Its location just outside the city meant the force had to deal with a mixture of rural and metropolitan problems. In an official statement in 2000, Waterland management issued an alarming wake-up call, declaring that the force had a narrow internal focus, an unhealthy financial situation and unsatisfactory results. Moreover, the quality of work and employee satisfaction was ‘not good’. In 2002, an evaluation report suggested the adoption of a new concept and culture, that is, a change programme referred to as ‘Mission & Vision’. Police officers had to adopt a ‘professional’, ‘result-driven’ and, above all, ‘citizen-oriented’ approach that was designed ‘to take people seriously, listen to them, and sympathise with their situation’ (Waterland, 2006: 4). Police officers were to undertake a ‘journey of cultural change, together with the entire police force’. Eventually, police officers were meant to embody ‘the Mission & Vision [that] will live throughout the whole organization and will lead to a substantive behavioural change’ (Waterland, 2003: 6).

## Findings

The vignettes described in the following sections illustrate how Waterland police officers embodied the cultural change programme in everyday work situations. In relation to the programme and its protagonists, the officers took various positions, three of which we describe in this article: countering change through criticism and ridicule (engaging in other-depreciating identity work), reluctantly complying with change (engaging in self-questioning identity work) and co-opting the change programme’s principles (engaging in self-affirming identity work). During the interpretative process, we started to notice that each of these responses tended to be elicited by a particular positioning adopted by the fieldworker vis-à-vis research participants or, vice versa, of participants vis-à-vis the fieldworker. Focusing on a few incidents critical to our reading of the data, the vignettes illustrate both the fieldworker’s situated positioning in relation to participants and the participants’ positioning in relation to the change programme.

### *Countering change and other-depreciating identity work*

On her first day in the field, the fieldworker made her way into the unmanaged spaces of the police force, where she soon discovered that police officers discussed the change programme in less flattering ways. The fieldworker was still an outsider to the field, a stranger and a newcomer, and, because of her interest in the change programme itself, a slightly suspect representative of management. Every time she introduced herself as the ‘Mission & Vision researcher’, she was met with wry smiles and then initiated into what seemed to be a common habit – critiquing and mocking the change programme. The following vignette illustrates how the fieldworker’s identity as a newcomer to the field with, in their eyes, a questionable research interest, invited or elicited a particular response on the part of research participants and thus allowed her to collect first-hand reactions to the research topic. Moreover, the following vignette demonstrates how, in an informal, collective setting, research participants typically told unofficial and unpolished stories about workaday life in order to communicate to management both their criticism and cynicism regarding the programme.



*Vignette – a morning briefing and dinner in the canteen.* 7.00 a.m. I arrive at the office in Waterland (the ‘I’ in the vignettes belongs to the third author). The police officers from the night shift are chatting with the ones from the morning shift about difficulties they experienced with, respectively, staying awake and waking up. Sabine, who I will be joining on her shift today, takes me to the coffee room for the briefing. Here, the officers are catching up on news from the district and discussing how to deal with problems. Although I had instructed myself not to share too much about my research project, I cannot hold my tongue when one of the officers asks me about it. Mentioning the cultural change programme ‘Mission & Vision’ instantly prompts a host of reactions from the officers, from the elderly ones in particular:

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| Sergeant Vince, with a grim look on his face: | ‘Mission & Vision’ is really rubbish.   |
| Sergeant Michael, on a slightly milder tone:  | It’s a good idea, but they should have skipped the hazy period afterwards [i.e., the implementation].   |
| Sergeant Vince:                               | It really wasn’t worth the money. Just a lot of vague talk! [Then, smiling:] I enjoyed the food on the theme days though! But [serious face again], there was no follow-up. |
| Sergeant Michael:                             | There are two sorts of people according to Freud. You got thinkers and you got practical people. Police people fall into the last category.                                 |

During the briefing, I quickly scribble down the critical comments and mocking remarks.

Later that day, over dinner in the canteen, a group of police officers discuss a team weekend at a campsite that was undertaken as part of the Mission & Vision programme. To them, the sessions (‘some kind of team-building activity’) demonstrated that the change programme had very little to do with their everyday work in the streets, but they quite enjoyed the weekend as a social event nonetheless. Jane remembers ‘the whole group got drunk’, while she, Rolf and John ‘got lost in the woods, and didn’t make it back until early the next morning’. Then, Rolf tells Jane that I am doing research for the programme and she starts laughing. I am a little surprised by her reaction. She does not seem to have any problems with me knowing the story.

Next, two officers walk in and ask me about my presence. I tell them my research topic and the men cast me a wry smile. The officers emphasise that the contents of the cultural change programme does not link up with their workaday realities, although the activities and initiatives undertaken as part of the Mission & Vision change programme can still be enjoyable, as Liv is willing to admit:

- |                                       |  |
|---------------------------------------|--|
| Liv:                                  | On the shopfloor, ‘Mission & Vision’ [the change programme] is fine. I mean, there’s a good atmosphere.  |
| Jane [in a mocking tone and smiling]: | Is that what ‘Mission & Vision’ is to you: a good atmosphere?  |
| Liv:                                  | Yeah, but I have no warm feelings for the programme. Theme days such as [when they showed] the ‘fish film’ [a documentary on fishmongers’ work pleasure] and when we had to do exercises... I thought that was really rubbish. |

She then turns to me and continues on a more serious note:

We have to work according to the ‘citizen-oriented approach’. But when you get in trouble just by doing your job, that actually makes *you* the victim. You’re on your own and there’s nobody to rely on. When you make a mistake, you’ll be fully investigated and you almost feel that *you* are the primary suspect. As an officer, it’s really like living in a glass house: everything you do is visible to others. They [managers] should pay more attention to us employees and adopt a *colleague*-oriented approach instead. When I had that accident the other day I never heard anything from any of my executives. When there’s an incident that might put the management in a bad light, they get very strict. Suddenly, several procedures are put in motion and it all becomes hierarchical.

Making me feel tainted by management, she seizes the opportunity to voice her discontents and to give advice to the higher ranks through my research:

I think that management doesn’t really know what we do; they just decide something from behind their desks. It would be good if *they* would participate in the shifts, so they’d know what we do and what we go through.

*Positioning vis-à-vis change/change agents.* Which initial insights into the organisational change process did the fieldworker-as-newcomer garner from visiting the unmanaged spaces? Clearly, police officers liked to discuss the change programme in critical and often mocking ways. An occasional compliment for Mission & Vision for being a ‘good idea’ was quickly followed by lamenting the ‘hazy’ implementation. The Mission & Vision weekend, which became a party for them, allowed them to pride themselves on having co-opted the social outing to strengthen their own in-group ties and to present the change programme as socially meaningful, but substantively meaningless. According to officers, there was a gulf between their day-to-day work and the ‘rubbish’ of the Mission & Vision programme. Contrasting ‘thinkers’ with ‘practical people’ (ascribing this distinction to Freud) allowed a sergeant to defend officers’ hands-on approach to conducting police work despite the intrusion of the money-wasting change programme’s managerial ‘vague talk’. By engaging in such self-appreciating and other-depreciating talk, they were able to reaffirm their own identities as no-nonsense police officers while mocking management for being the self-proclaimed champions of community policing with thoroughly misguided, airy-fairy ideas (see Table 1 for an overview of the fieldworker’s identity, participants’ responses and identity positioning for vignette 1).

The message sent to management was clear: the activities and initiatives undertaken as part of the cultural change programme did not link up with officers’ workaday realities. Directing the

**Table 1.** Situational context and both the researcher’s and the researched’s positionings in vignette 1.

Description of context and situation	The researcher’s identity in relation to the researched	Participants’ positioning vis-à-vis change	Participants’ positioning vis-à-vis change agents
Informal, collective interactions of subordinates together: before/after a morning briefing and during a canteen dinner	Newcomer/management representative to whom participants give firsthand, unofficial and unpolished reactions	Countering change: officers challenge the dominant change talk through cynicism, ridicule and criticism	Explicit other-depreciation (‘police managers are hazy and vague’); implicit self-affirmation (officers are hands-on, yet constantly hassled by change efforts)

corps from behind their desks, managers had become disconnected from, and unsupportive of, officers in the streets. The warmth for citizens prescribed in the Mission & Vision programme was paralleled by management's coldness towards employees. While Liv, for example, saw herself as the victim of an accident she had been part of, she felt that management treated her as the perpetrator. Instead of giving her backup, she was 'fully investigated'. In her eyes, management's top-down, procedural and distrustful approach on that occasion contrasted sharply with the 'soft' and egalitarian tone of the Mission & Vision programme. Subverting the smooth talk that supported a citizen-oriented police culture, she argued for a 'colleague-oriented approach' instead. Officers' sense of being accused by management is a theme we come back to in the second vignette.

### *Reluctantly complying with change and self-questioning identity work*

In the second vignette, the researcher's (unintentional) positioning in the field again provoked or elicited a particular response on the part of research participants. The participant saw the fieldworker – who had been in the field for some weeks now – as an accomplice of management (and/or as a citizen who desired the citizen-oriented approach promoted by management) who was critical of the participant's performance. From a research point of view, we initially considered this fieldworker's identity to be not only unintended, but also unproductive and undesirable. Somewhat to our own surprise, however, it appeared to be crucial to generating new insight, namely: it helped to surface Waterland police officers' second response to the cultural change programme. Instead of casting themselves in the role of the accusers, criticising and ridiculing 'Mission & Vision', they saw themselves as being the accused: the change programme (personified by the fieldworker) implicitly passed judgement on their (lack of) professionalism as police officers.

*Vignette – A night shift.* At 10.50 p.m., there is a group of policemen chitchatting the last minutes of their shift away when I enter the canteen. They all turn to look at me and I get a sense of being an outsider, if only because I am not wearing a uniform. Tonight, I am scheduled to join Janice on the night shift and, right after we meet, I find myself running after her, jumping in the back seat of the police car, my backpack still half open. We are off to talk to a victim of an attempted robbery. The victim, a young man, is told that I am a colleague who is accompanying the officer on this night. He shows us where the attempted burglary took place. Janice and her colleague listen to the story and write down all of the relevant information. Janice asks some formal questions and, after this procedure, we leave.

Afterwards, Janice asks me what I think of her performance as an officer. Her question puts me in an awkward situation – I thought *I* would be the one asking questions. I tell her that, personally, I would have appreciated some comforting words if someone had tried to rob me. As I utter these words, I immediately become a bit embarrassed – I realise it sounds as if I am lecturing an experienced officer. Janice's expression seems to harden a bit. She is quiet, nods and, seemingly forgiving my impertinence, says that doing so would have been quite logical. Whenever someone cries or gets emotional she does indeed take an empathising role. On a more critical note, she goes on to add:

On the other hand, being citizen-oriented can be really hard when dealing with a criminal or a traffic offender. Then it feels unnatural. It can be quite paradoxical: they [citizens] want you to catch the bad guys. But they *don't* want you to harass them by writing tickets.

Adding this nuance, she slides into a more critical attitude towards a citizen-oriented approach (such as that described in the previous vignette) and, while doing so, seems to be giving me a lecture.

After this short conversation we drive off, quickly encountering a zigzagging car driven by youngsters with tattoos listening to hip-hop music. The car is apprehended and Janice's male colleague, who gives the driver a breath test that shows he has had too much to drink, starts deliberating on the phone with the sergeant. Janice, who had been standing with her hands in her pockets, now walks up to me to say that having her hands in her pockets is 'not really professional'. I am surprised. She seems to think I came along to check on her and get her to account for her (lack of) professionalism and citizen-orientation. My presence turns on her 'Mission & Vision conscience'. Although she seems open to feedback and reflections, Janice also seems a bit offended and tempted to defend herself, as if the cultural change programme implicitly critiques her performance as a police officer.

*Positioning vis-à-vis change/change agents.* In this vignette, the fieldworker's identity as a suspect outsider brought a new side of the police officers' positionings in relation to the change programme into view – a side that might otherwise have remained unsaid and unnoticed. The research participant equated the researcher's scrutinising look with managerial surveillance, as if the fieldworker's eyes were those of management and she herself represented the managerial change plans and policies. The fieldworker's judgmental remark on the policewoman's demeanour had created or reinforced this impression. Consequently, while fieldworkers usually do not aspire to the role of management accomplice, it did on this occasion elicit a response from the researched that deepened our understanding: police officers interpreted change plans as a comment on, if not a critique of, their own work behaviour. Symbolically, terms such as professionalism, result-driven or citizen-orientation seem to be hurrah-words; that is, all positive and impossible to challenge. Nonetheless, police officers interpreted hurrah-words as boo-words that passed judgement on them, as if their work performance was insufficiently professional, citizen-oriented and result-driven. As a result, because they felt criticised, undervalued and unsupported by the programme, police officers only reluctantly supported the Mission & Vision programme (see Table 2 for an overview).

**Table 2.** Situational context and both the researcher's and the researched's positionings in vignette 2.

Description of context and situation	The researcher's identity in relation to the researched	Participants' positioning vis-à-vis change	Participants' positioning vis-à-vis change agents
Shadowing an individual police officer on the beat (officer interacts with citizens and self-confidently reflects on interactions)	Management accomplice (physically close yet socially distant) checking on participants' work performance	Change rhetoric, presented as neutral/positive ('hurrah words'), is interpreted as implicit denunciation of officers' work performance ('boo-words')	Police officers self-critically evaluate their own performance (explicit self-questioning) in light of the change programme (implicit accusation by others)

### *Co-opting change and self-affirming identity work*

The third vignette shows how the fieldworker's positioning as sympathetic to police officers' daily practices and points of view allowed us to add a new layer of interpretation. By manoeuvring herself into the position of intimate interlocutor, participants felt empowered to open up (or perhaps, alternatively: after being manoeuvred into a warm relationship by a police officer, the fieldworker

was open to being politically influenced by the participant). In the context of this intimacy, a third, less-defensive response to the cultural change programme surfaced, one in which Waterland police officers radically reversed the role division – between police managers as change agents and police officers as change recipients – by positioning themselves as the preeminent representatives of community policing. These police officers claimed that management had hardly succeeded in making the corps more citizen-oriented, but that, as an intrinsic part of their professional conduct, they themselves had already adopted much of the behaviours propagated in the Mission & Vision programme in their day-to-day work. In this way, they were able to cast themselves as the forerunners of community policing while portraying those who had initiated the Mission & Vision programme as lagging behind.

*Vignette – a bike ride through the district.* I am stressed out because my train is delayed. Martin, a middle-aged police officer, texts me: ‘It just isn’t your day. Relax. Take your time. The weather is fine’. He picks me up from the station and, on the way to the police station, talks about his knee operation. Sitting outside the office and enjoying the morning sun I start asking questions about the Mission & Vision programme. ‘The program hasn’t really caught on with my colleagues’, Martin assures me. He starts to list the bottlenecks for a citizen-oriented approach, such as the logistics (‘It’s a big disaster: on a busy day, citizens need to wait for hours in a packed waiting room’) and the hearing rooms (‘They’re too small and it smells’). And, he says, being citizen-oriented should involve going to traffic collisions ‘to calm people down, even if the damage isn’t too big’, but ‘instructions from the top’ tell them not to do so. It’s also problematic that management sets multiple goals that are often in conflict with one another; for example, being citizen-oriented and setting targets at the same time – the mandate to give a particular number of tickets a week overrides an orientation towards citizens. Martin went on:

During a night shift, a few officers wrote tickets for all the cars in a street for being parked on the sidewalk. The next day, there were a lot of angry citizens at the station asking: ‘What’s the meaning of this?!’ Of course this was never the intention of setting targets. That’s what happens though, when the district chief sends emails every week asking about this week’s results. Once, a colleague of mine was working on a big drugs case. Of course he had no time to give tickets every day, but they didn’t take that into account.

Martin’s critique sounds familiar to me. However, rather than questioning the intentions or objectives of the change programme, he turns the Mission & Vision battery on itself to articulate where and why the programme does not bring about the intended change or – alternatively – why it is unnecessary, because police officers ‘already’ work according to its principles: ‘For some officers, citizens really are at the centre’. He points to a police officer passing by who, in his view, epitomises the concept of citizen-orientation.

After having talked for almost an hour, Martin and I go on a bike ride through the district. Martin takes the time to talk to people. He chats with some old men fishing and a shopkeeper who has trouble with loitering teens. He shares information with a bicycle repairman who often works outside on the pavement talking to people. He informs a snack bar owner who had asked a question about a licence last time Martin was around. We ride through a park where there has been an increase in crime lately and Martin explains how he often ‘checks the place, to show citizens that they are being taken care of, but also to show criminals that we’re checking up on them’. We then visit a handful of different people: an antisocial family living in a caravan, an old lady who Martin thinks is being robbed by a young man who does her grocery shopping and a family suspected of child abuse. Later, I join Martin as he continues his string of diverse activities: he plays bingo in a homeless centre where a fight had recently broken out, talks to one man who was signalled for

provoking young children and another man in a big Mercedes with a police record who was stabbed the week before and who claims he 'would have solved the case himself if the police hadn't interfered'. It is important to maintain relationships with informants, victims and (potential) perpetrators, Martin explains, 'to prevent people from doing stuff or to help them out'. As I watch him work, I sense his pride in doing a good job. I see his dedication and frustration. Although he might deliberately be showing off his skills in the presence of a young female researcher, I do admire him for maintaining relationships with so many diverse people. Being focused on citizens appears to be a major part of his job.

After a long day, we arrive at the station and, again, sit outside, now enjoying the evening sun. Martin asks me about my impression of his police work. I tell him his work resembles that of a social worker. Martin [grinning]: 'You mean a lot of chit-chat? It pays off you know. When I show my face regularly, people give me info that's valuable in solving criminal cases'.

A colleague comes up to Martin and tells him that, on Monday, they will have to report what they have done with the Mission & Vision programme to management. Both start to laugh.

Martin's colleague walks away and I tell him that every time I mention the Mission & Vision programme officers either react rather sceptically or start laughing. He is not surprised and starts criticising the programme again. Despite management's claim that 'Mission & Vision' is new and innovative, he maintains, 'we already do much of what is mentioned in the programme on a day-to-day basis'. The term Mission & Vision itself seems to fill him with aversion. He tells me that whenever he sees 'Mission & Vision announcements' in the internal information bulletin he does not read them: 'I deliberately skip it. If it wouldn't say Mission & Vision, I might actually read it. [Mocking smile:] Perhaps they should rename it!' I ask whether he feels like a 'cultural carrier' as outlined in the Mission & Vision programme. He responds: 'No, I'm a professional officer who tries to do his work the best he can while remaining true to himself'.

Then, he invites me to have cake in his office. It is his birthday today.

*Positioning vis-à-vis change/change agents.* As described in our third vignette, the fieldworker's shadowing of the police officer in his everyday work and adoption of the role of interested interlocutor relaxed him into sharing his viewpoints and showing his professional pride (or, perhaps, the police officer hoped she would send a message to management). This interchange revealed another positioning in police officers' response repertoire vis-à-vis the cultural change programme and its proponents. While the mockery and criticism described in the first vignette suggested a stark contrast between police officers' and police managers' beliefs regarding what constitutes professional policing, our third vignette shows a degree of overlap: both Martin's work behaviour and his critique of management's plans and policies suggest that he was fully dedicated to community policing. However, like his colleagues, Martin preferred not to frame his dedication in terms of the Mission & Vision programme, instead ascribing the principles behind community policing to himself and to his profession (not to the change programme).

This strategy of self-appropriation allowed police officers to create a new division of identities different from the one management had carved out for them. While management cast police officers as insufficiently 'professional', 'result-driven' and 'citizen-oriented', the police officers themselves claimed to already embody the proclaimed missions of the change programme in their day-to-day performance as professionals. In word and gesture, they did their best to embody citizen-orientation and, in doing so, not only dispossess police managers of the principles behind the change programme but actually reclaim them as the very heart of their daily work. Such self-reaffirming identity work created advantages for the police officers. Because those targeted by the change programme did not experience the obligatory behaviour as being new or different, it became more difficult for management to exercise power by simply prescribing 'new' behaviour. In fact,



by co-opting and championing the change missions, the putatively ‘new’ was reframed as ‘business-as-usual’. What is more, and while all the while remaining true to their critical stance, police officers also wriggled themselves out of the potentially uncomfortable position of troublemakers resisting change. By claiming the title of ‘real champions of community policing’ for themselves, they were even able to question the police managers’ own commitments to community policing. In their eyes, management fell short of its own citizen-oriented aims. Consequently, although they had been targeted as change recipients, police officers subtly turned the usual role division between managers and the ‘managed’ on its head by casting themselves as experts in community policing (see Table 3 for an overview).

**Table 3.** Situational context and both the researcher’s and the researched’s positionings in vignette 3.

Description of context and situation	The researcher’s identity in relation to the researched	Participants’ positioning vis-à-vis change	Participants’ positioning vis-à-vis change agents
Shadowing an individual police officer on the beat (officer interacts with citizens and self-confidently reflects on interactions)	Interlocutor/participant observer as <i>confidante</i> in one-on-one interaction	Co-optation of change: officers walk the walk (acting, and claiming to be, citizen-oriented) without talking the talk (denouncing the programme’s effects by using its own objectives)	Self-affirming identity work: police officers are the true champions of the programme’s underlying principles (managers are lagging behind)

## Discussion and conclusion

The case analysis presented in this article allows us to extend existing insights in a number of ways. We begin by addressing the implications for the literature on organisational change. By cultivating a sensitivity to the relationship between the researcher and the researched in our fieldwork, we were able to offer a contextual and socially nuanced account of police officers’ different positionings in relation to the cultural change programme. Moreover, we have shown how those targeted by the change programme as ‘change recipients’ had different ways of construing, and in effect *countering*, *complying with* or *co-opting*, change agents’ plans and policies in different situations. When police officers were together, they played up their sense of internal camaraderie and external hostility (Reisig, 2010) in mockery of the change programme and criticism of managers’ communication surrounding it. In individual encounters with the fieldworker, police officers sometimes also expressed criticism, but when the fieldworker shadowed police officers on the beat they usually adopted a different position in relation to the change programme. On some occasions, they somewhat reluctantly *complied with* the principles behind the change programme and self-critically evaluated their own conduct. On other occasions, they rejected the change rhetoric yet strategically *co-opted* the underlying principles of community policing by claiming to ‘already’ practise community policing in their day-to-day work. While critical scholars widely acknowledge polyphony in discursive struggles over organisational change (e.g. Buchanan and Dawson, 2007), few studies empirically show how organisational actors talk and act differently in relation to change initiatives in different situations. For an adequate understanding of people’s responses to change initiatives, researchers thus need to account for such situational variation.

Our analysis also garnered new insight into organisational actors' identity work in relation to managerial change initiatives. We extend views recently proposed by organisational scholars who criticised the organisational change literature for routinely making a distinction, and creating a fixed dichotomy, between change agents and change recipients (e.g. Thomas et al., 2011). Our analysis of officers countering, complying with or co-opting change demonstrates actors' intricate and varying self-other positionings. First, police officers collectively criticised planned change by engaging in *other-depreciating* (and implicit self-affirming) identity work vis-à-vis change agents by depicting themselves as doers, hands-on and practical, and by ridiculing managers as the hazy spokesmen of misguided change plans. Second, in more private settings, participants were able to reluctantly comply with change by engaging in *self-questioning* identity work. Feeling criticised, undervalued and unsupported by the change programme – and thus 'accused' by management of not doing a good job – police officers critically evaluated their own performance in light of the programme's principles. Third, in such private settings, police officers could also co-opt community policing and engage in subtle *self-affirming* (and implicit other-depreciating) identity work. Reversing the change agent/change recipient division of roles, they were then able to not only claim themselves to be the proper champions and rightful owners of the principles underpinning the change programme, but also to depict managers as slackers who fell short of their own change-oriented ambitions. Consequently, instead of constructing a simple binary opposition between change agents and change recipients, police officers varied their positionings in relation to managers from one situation to another, each time subtly reframing their self-other claims.

This brings us to the methodological implications for doing organisational research. Our study testifies to the significance of engaging in, and reflecting on, a variety of relations with research participants. Indeed, it was the adoption or projection (by others) of different identities in the field that gave the fieldworker a few close-ups of the complex dynamics of organisational change and showed how actors' positionings vis-à-vis planned change was multifaceted and context-bound. Within each vignette that we presented, different identity relations surfaced between the researcher and the researched, each producing different kinds of information. Being cast as an ignorant newcomer, the fieldworker was: (vignette 1) initiated into officers' backstage resistance of criticism and ridicule, (vignette 2) viewed as a management representative who was there to check on officers, which allowed her to see that the change programme was experienced as implicit critique to which officers reluctantly listened and (vignette 3) considered an interested interlocutor, which allowed her to observe officers' co-optation of the change programme's principles. Experiencing a variety of the researcher/researched's identities thus opened up a wider field of vision. In this case, a sensitivity to the situated positionings of the researcher in the field made us 'see' the situated positionings of the researched in the change process.

First and foremost, this challenges the predominant view of immersion as the principal testimonial of good ethnography – an ignorant newcomer, a suspect management representative and an interested interlocutor yielded equally valuable information. In addition to the identity of 'insider to the field', fieldworkers may want to welcome more distant, less aspired-to identities. Second, our study shows that rather than necessarily seeking immersion or distance, organisational ethnographers may want to embrace, and self-reflexively analyse, the information that a wide variety of researcher/researched positionings can garner in their fieldwork. Our study suggests that a range of fieldwork relations may generate a range of alternative vantage points. By acknowledging and appreciating different researcher positionings in the field, we do not mean to prompt researchers to maximise research output by strategically manoeuvring in the field and constantly adjusting their identities. In fact, all three vignettes draw attention to the fact that the researcher's positioning is

not chosen by, or at the discretion of, the researcher – it is the participant that casts the researcher as ‘the other’ (Butcher, 2013). As such, rather than turning fieldworkers into shrewd manipulators, our analysis suggests that fieldworkers themselves must cultivate a reflexive awareness of the mixture of both achieved and ascribed identities in the field.

Subsequently, we may wonder: which types of insight might different fieldwork identities garner? To develop a tentative answer to this question, we again find some initial direction in the vignettes described in this article. First, by being viewed as an outsider and newcomer to the field, research participants might initiate the fieldworker into their cultural codes and customs, explaining formal rules and telling key stories, giving chapter and verse to the innocent ethnographer while shielding more private, personal or political information from prying eyes. Second, should a fieldworker come to be seen as siding with the ‘enemy’, as a hostile ‘one-sider’ (e.g. a guest of management), then he or she could pay special attention to one-on-one encounters with research participants, who may then put up a more outward-faced, other-directed performance, keeping up appearances or defending themselves against accusations. Third, once accepted as an insider and a confidante, research participants might be more open and off-guard or self-absorbed and inward-focused, sharing intimate or confidential insider information while omitting details that are taken for granted or considered irrelevant or politically sensitive behind the scenes.

As we focused on the specific effects of different fieldworker positions on the type of data generated, our analysis is also a reminder of the importance of, and amendment to, reflexivity on researchers’ positionality. As Pachirat (2018) contends, ‘the power of ethnography lies not only or even primarily in its capacity to get closer to the ground, to better “collect data” as if data were like so many rocks lying about in a field’ (p. 18). Rather, ethnography forces us ‘to confront the ways we actually co-generate rather than simply collect data’. In our article, instead of proudly exhibiting our collection of rocks, we aimed to expose how what we ‘picked up’ depended on what our fieldwork relations brought along. The fieldworker was situated at the intersection of multiple identities and these impacted how people in the field responded to her and how we filtered her fieldwork experiences. Indeed, the situated positionings of the researched in the change process came into sight only through the situated positionings of the researcher in the field. Instead of being apologetic about such co-generation, a fieldworker may critically reflect on her effects on the findings; not for purely methodological reasons, but to fuel the interpretive process. When sensitivity to researcher-specific positionality becomes part of the researcher’s logic of inquiry, it may be used to channel the research process by recording, for example: how research participants respond in which situations, which identities they ascribe to the researcher, which actions on the part of the fieldworker might have triggered their response and so on. Arguably, the more nested a fieldworker within the intricate network of fieldwork relations – which are inevitably fraught with power and emotion – ‘the more accounting for these sorts of positionality matters to the quality of the research’ (Pachirat, 2018: 19). Rather than treating it as a box to tick with a standard phrase in a methods section, researcher reflexivity then turns into an opportunity for interpretation and theorisation.

As with all research, our study has several limitations. Highlighting these may help to sketch some possible directions for future research. Because context is too broad a category to analyse in its entirety, we chose, for pragmatic reasons, to restrict our analysis to the role of the researcher’s identities vis-à-vis research participants in different settings. In doing so, we inevitably limited ourselves to a significant-yet-specific facet of ‘context’ while ignoring a number of other different, possibly relevant contexts in our study. As we traversed both different work contexts (e.g. day and night shifts, community work vs crime-fighting) and spatial settings (the lunchroom, the police car, the briefing, the district, etc.), engaging in both interactions among team members and face-to-face conversations, these various contexts may have had an impact on participants’ ways of relating to

the researcher and on their own specific narrative and meaning-making practices (Van Hulst and Ybema, Forthcoming). Furthermore, we probably could have stayed in the field longer to see change plans and police officers' actions and reactions unfold from event to event (following short-term processes) and from one period to another (following long-term processes). For the self-reflexive researcher, such different social and temporal contexts constitute opportunities for further analysis of organisational processes as contexted occurrences.

## Authors' Note

Sierk Ybema is also affiliated with Anglia Ruskin University, UK.

## Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

## References

- Alvesson M, Hardy C and Harley B (2008) Reflecting on reflexivity: Reflexive textual practices in organization and management theory. *Journal of Management Studies* 45(3): 480–501.
- Bate SP (1997) Whatever happened to organizational anthropology? A review of the field of organizational ethnography and anthropological studies. *Human Relations* 50(9): 1147–1171.
- Beech N, Gilmore C, Hibbert P, et al. (2016). Identity-in-the-work and musicians' struggles: The production of self-questioning identity work. *Work, Employment and Society* 30(3): 506–522.
- Buchanan D and Dawson P (2007) Discourse and audience: Organizational change as multi-story process. *Journal of Management Studies* 44(5): 669–686.
- Butcher T (2013) Longing to belong. *Qualitative Research in Organizations and Management* 8(3): 242–257.
- Cunliffe AL and Karunanayake G (2013) Working within hyphen-spaces in ethnographic research: Implications for research identities and practice. *Organizational Research Methods* 16(3): 364–392.
- Davis F (1973) The Martian and the convert: Ontological polarities in social research. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 2(3): 333–343.
- Dent EB and Goldberg SG (1999) Challenging resistance to change. *The Journal of Applied Behavioral Science* 35(1): 25–41.
- Desmond M (2007) *On the Fireline: Living and Dying with Wildland Firefighters*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Geertz C (1974) From the 'native's point of view': On the nature of anthropological understanding. *Bulletin of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences* 28(1): 26–45.
- Gray B, Stensaker IG and Jansen KJ (2012) Qualitative challenges for complexifying organizational change research context, voice, and time. *The Journal of Applied Behavioral Science* 48(2): 121–134.
- Hammersley M and Atkinson P (2007) *Ethnography. Principles in Practice*. London: Routledge.
- Hibbert P, Sillince J, Diefenbach T, et al. (2014) Relationally reflexive practice: A generative approach to theory development in qualitative research. *Organizational Research Methods* 17(3): 278–298.
- Kellogg KC (2009) Operating room: Relational spaces and micro-institutional change in two surgical teaching hospitals. *American Journal of Sociology* 115(3): 657–711.
- Kusenbach M (2003) Street phenomenology: The go-along as ethnographic research tool. *Ethnography* 4(3): 455–485.
- Michailova S, Piekkari R, Plakoyiannaki E, et al. (2014) Breaking the silence about exiting fieldwork: A relational approach and its implications for theorizing. *Academy of Management Review* 39(2): 138–161.
- Mumby DK (2005) Theorizing resistance in organizational studies. A dialectical approach. *Management Communication Quarterly* 19(1): 19–44.
- Orr JE (1996) *Talking about Machines*. New York: Cornell University Press.
- Pachirat T (2018) *Among Wolves: Ethnography and the Immersive Study of Power*. New York: Routledge.
- Reisig MD (2010) Community and problem-oriented policing. *Crime and Justice* 39(1): 1–53.

- Shotter J (2006) Understanding process from within: An argument for ‘witness-thinking’. *Organization Studies* 27(4): 585–604.
- Silverman D (2000) *Doing Qualitative Research. A Practical Handbook*. London: SAGE.
- Thomas R, Sargent LD and Hardy C (2011) Managing organizational change: Negotiating meaning and power-resistance relations. *Organization Science* 22(1): 22–41.
- Van Hulst M and Ybema S (Forthcoming) From what to where: A setting-sensitive approach to organizational storytelling. *Organization Studies*.
- Van Maanen J (1988) *Tales of the Field. on Writing Ethnography*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago press.
- Van Maanen J (2011) Ethnography as work: Some rules of engagement. *Journal of Management Studies* 48(1): 218–234.
- Waterland (2003) *Joint Panorama Views*.
- Waterland (2006) *Photo Future 2007–2010*.
- Watson T (2011) Ethnography, reality, and truth: The vital need for studies of ‘how things work’ in organizations and management. *Journal of Management Studies* 48(1): 202–217.
- Ybema S and Horvers M (2017) Resistance through compliance: The strategic and subversive potential of frontstage and backstage resistance. *Organization Studies* 38(9): 1233–1251.
- Ybema S and Kamsteeg F (2009) Making the familiar strange: A case for disengaged organizational ethnography’. In: Ybema S, Yanow D, Kamsteeg F and Wels H (eds) *Organizational Ethnography: Studying the Complexities of Everyday Life*. London: SAGE, pp. 101–119.
- Ybema S, Thomas R and Hardy C (2016) Organizational change and resistance: An identity perspective. In: Courpasson D and Vallas S (eds) *The Sage Handbook of Resistance*. London: SAGE, pp. 386–404.
- Ybema S, Yanow D, Kamsteeg F, et al. (2009) Studying everyday organizational life. In: Ybema S, Yanow D, Kamsteeg F, et al. (eds) *Organizational Ethnography: Studying the Complexity of Everyday Life*. London: SAGE, pp. 1–20.